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Maternal health is now deteriorating in much of the world, UN report shows

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The World Health Organization has warned that maternal health has been declining in many parts of the world since 2016, halting 15 years of progress.

A report[1] by WHO on behalf of UN agencies, published on 23 February, said that while maternal deaths are largely preventable with quality healthcare, they have either increased or stagnated in most regions of the world in the past five years.

On average, a woman currently dies during pregnancy or childbirth every two minutes.

"While pregnancy should be a time of immense hope and a positive experience for all women, it is still a dangerous experience for millions around the world who lack access to high quality, respectful healthcare," said WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

The report collates health data provided by countries from 2000 to 2020, broken down at a national and regional level.

The number of maternal deaths—fatalities because of complications from pregnancy or childbirth when a woman is pregnant or within six weeks of the end of the pregnancy—decreased significantly in much of the world between 2000 and 2015. The maternal mortality ratio halved in 58 countries from 2000 to 2015 and reduced by two thirds in 18.

Advances stalling

But the rapid advances largely stalled from 2016 to 2020. The UN recorded 287 000 maternal deaths worldwide in 2020, down from 309 000 in 2016 when the UN's sustainable development goals came into effect.

Anshu Banheree, WHO's director for the Department of Maternal, Newborn, Child, and Adolescent Health and Ageing, said the slowing progress puts the world "far off track" in meeting its 2030 maternal health and gender equality goals.

He told a press conference on 21 February, "With the right healthcare, pregnancy should be a positive experience for all women. These numbers show persistent inequities between countries, however, which are undermining their rights, and we see also that there is over a hundredfold higher risk of dying depending on where a woman delivers her baby, particularly in low income countries compared with high income countries."

In WHO's Europe and Northern America and Latin America and the Caribbean regions maternal mortality increased 17% and 15% respectively from 2016 to 2020.

The report also revealed how stark global healthcare inequalities continue to concentrate maternal deaths in the poorest and most conflict afflicted nations. Around 70% of all maternal deaths in 2020 were recorded in sub-Saharan Africa, and nine countries facing severe humanitarian crises recorded maternal mortality that was more than double the world average (223 maternal deaths per 100 000 live births).

"This report provides yet another stark reminder of the urgent need to double down on our commitment to women and adolescent health," said Juan Pablo Uribe, global director for health, nutrition, and population at the World Bank.

Causes largely preventable

Most maternal deaths are caused by severe bleeding, high blood pressure, pregnancy related infections, and underlying conditions that can be aggravated by pregnancy, such as HIV/AIDS and malaria. The causes are largely preventable and treatable but certain regions lack the necessary access to high quality healthcare.

A lack of access to safe abortions also remains a key problem, as more than half of the world's pregnancies are unintended.

Though access to healthcare facilities has increased for women giving birth in many countries the quality of care is still poor, Banheree said. More than 50% of global health facilities lack basic water and hygiene services.

The report identified a lack of funding for primary healthcare systems, shortages of trained healthcare workers, and weak supply chains for medical products as the three key obstacles to progress on maternal health.

The world needs to increase access to assisted births, prenatal and postnatal care, childhood vaccinations, nutrition, and family planning, the report recommended.

Around one in three women do not have four of the recommended eight antenatal checks or receive essential postnatal care, and roughly 270 million lack access to modern family planning methods.

Data on the impact of covid-19 on maternal health is insufficient for a global analysis but the disease likely played a negative role as studies show that coronavirus infections can increase health risks during pregnancy.

Natalia Kanem, executive director of the United Nations Population Fund, said, "Over 280 000 fatalities in a single year is unconscionable. We can and must do better by urgently investing in family planning and filling the global shortage of 900 000

midwives so that every woman can get the lifesaving care she needs. We have the tools, knowledge, and resources to end preventable maternal deaths—what we need now is the political will."

Despite the setbacks there is no reason why the progress seen at the turn of the century should not resume, UN agency directors said.

Two WHO regions—Australia and New Zealand and Central and Southern Asia—experienced significant declines in maternal mortality during 2016-2020. Mortality declined 35% and 16% respectively and some 31 countries across the world saw similar progress.

1 Trends in maternal mortality 2000 to 2020: estimates by WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group, and UNDESA/Population Division. 23 February 2023. www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240068759.